

# God's Tradition

Exodus 8:16-25; Psalm 19; Matthew 15:2-11



Hearing and following God's voice is not always easy. Growing up in church, it is only natural to expect the programs of the church to be the encapsulate service to God. After all, the institutions of the church are the product of the efforts of our forefathers to follow God's leading and give feet to faith. Our programs, activities, organizations, and traditions have arisen out of the desire to serve God. They are the "tried and true" means of living out faith. Is tradition always agree with serving God? Does God forever work through the same patterns, structures, and means? Is there a difference between our traditions and those of God? Does the fact that "We've never done it that way before," mean that God does not either?

Moses and Pharaoh did not have a very agreeable relationship. Moses was a constant irritant, a thorn in Pharaoh's side. The Hebrews did not seem to care for the results of their encounters too much, either. When Moses first confronted Pharaoh, it just made life more difficult for them. Their work load was greatly increased, and that had no gain from it. After a second, then a third plague upon Egypt, Pharaoh's magicians began to sense that more was going on than they could understand. The plagues were beyond their power to replicate or explain, and they began to recognize that God was behind Moses' actions and the plagues that he announced.

Pharaoh was unwilling to look beyond life as he knew it. He did not disbelieve the world of gods and the actions of the gods upon the earth. His was no disbelief of the gods intervening in human affairs or concerned with events in this world. His was a determination to maintain life within the bounds of normalcy. Pharaoh liked the status quo. He benefited from maintaining the Hebrews in subjection as slaves. Though his court was becoming aware of the action of *Yahweh* in the midst of the land, Pharaoh was too invested in his own power, position, and economic welfare to heed the direction of God, nor the counsel of his court officials.

He paid heavily for his inability to let go of self-interest and follow the leading of God. While his court officials recognized God's action, presence, and confirmation of purpose, Pharaoh stuck doggedly to his direction, tradition, and self-importance. He was the one most heavily invested in the traditions and power structures of Egypt. It was therefore hardest for him to recognize or accept that he was invested in a direction that ran counter to the will of God.

The psalmist speaks of the purity of God's law or instruction. He reminds us how there are those who refuse to hear or heed God's instruction, just as Pharaoh in Egypt. And yet he calls us to remember how God's instructions and directions create life and revive us from the inside. Following God's precepts is greater far and better than seeking after earthly wealth, power, and control—a difficult lesson for us to accept. It is much easier to slip into the tyranny of tradition and self-interest.

Such was the situation in Jesus' day. As Pharaoh had hardened himself against hearing and heeding the instruction of *Yahweh*, the religious leaders among the Jews had inadvertently done the same. They had become entrenched in their leadership roles, status, and power, and had become unable to recognize what the common folk around them saw. As Jesus taught with authority and performed miracles, the establishment worried about losing what tradition had built.

They were concerned that Jesus and his disciples did not follow the traditions of the elders, such as the ritual washing of their hands prior to eating. This was a laudable hygienic practice that would have hurt no one to have followed. They understood neglecting such a practice not as an endangerment to Jesus and the disciples, however, but as an offense against their traditions. They worried about their traditional interpretations of Mosaic Law and traditional practices that sustained their standing among the people. They served their traditions out of a sense of self-preservation and self-interest.

They interpreted honoring one's parents in a manner that invalidated God's instruction and purpose in the command. They wanted to find ways around those admonitions they found to be onerous. They elevated their traditions above the Word of God and the will of the One they claimed to serve. Their tradition had become a means to serve their own interests, rather than a vehicle for serving God. It had taken the place of God's direction, overriding God's will for their lives.

Jesus declared that they had exchanged service to God for service to human traditions. Their highest priority was self and the comfort, prestige, and power brought by their traditions, traditional interpretations, and religious structures. Rather than seeking to follow God in deepening dependence upon God, they retreated into towers of isolation. "This is the way we have always done things." "These are the traditions that our forefathers passed on to us." "These are the tried and true ways of serving God." They were so accustomed to following their traditions, so invested in their traditional structures, that they could not recognize when such ran counter to God's will.

Jesus chided them for tithing their cooking spices while ignoring things like mercy, forgiveness, justice, and love. He chided them for following traditions that ignored God's call for them to love one another and treat each other with honor, respect, and humility. He showed them a better way of living. He practiced the meaning of following God in meaningful service. He followed tradition when appropriate, but did not allow it to override dependence and service to God. To Jesus, it was not tradition that was inviolable, but following God.

Following God was to be the point of the tradition of the elders, wasn't it? They had not been designed to ignore God's instruction or violate Mosaic Law. Both had happened along the way, despite good intentions. The Jews had come to focus more time on the traditional about God's will than on doing what God desired. They proclaimed human teachings as though they were divine instruction. They lost sight of what they claimed to hold so dear. Tradition had taken over and was exerting tyrannical control over the people. God was lost in the shuffle of tending to the routines of religiosity.

Jesus did not preach that tradition is bad. He himself held to much of the tradition of the Jews. He did not allow tradition to violate following God's will, however. Jesus desired to give the disciples a means of measuring tradition against a higher rule. He wanted them to see God's rule as inviolable and tradition as an imperfect aid to serving God in wholehearted devotion. He demanded a critical eye towards tradition, discerning what part is of God and what part is of human origin. What part is good, what part is better, and what part is fit for nothing?

What about our own traditions? Is it possible that we might find ourselves violating God's will in order to preserve our own traditions? Which is more important, the way we have done things or what God desires us to do?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*